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ABSTRACT

Learners of English in the United Kingdom find that the language they hear in the classroom is different from native speech outside the classroom. Previous participants in Scotland's Institute for Applied Linguistics Studies summer pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes program had requested more opportunities to talk with native speakers in order to practice their oral communication skills. With that mind, a non-teacher course assistant was hired to take part in speaking classes and to chat with students during breaks. This paper reports findings of a study of student-teacher and student-assistant talk, based on recordings made in one type of speaking lesson. A post-course questionnaire was also completed to compare students' interactions with the teacher and the assistant. Results indicated that even in class, interaction with the assistant gave students the opportunity for different sorts of talk than they had with the teacher. Having a classroom assistant made a notable difference to both the distribution and the nature of native speaker-student interaction in class. The assistant also increased the amount of speaking practice outside class. An appendix presents the research questionnaire. (Contains 13 references.) (SM)

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THE VALUE OF AN ADDITIONAL NATIVE SPEAKER IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Tony Lynch and Kenneth Anderson (IALS)

Abstract

Learners of English in Britain soon realise that the language they hear in the classroom is different from native speech outside. Previous participants on the IALS summer pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme had asked for more opportunities to talk with native speakers, in order to practise their oral communication skills. With that in mind, we took on a non-teacher course assistant in 1996, who would take part in Speaking classes and also chat with students in breaks. In this paper we report the findings of a study of student/teacher and student/assistant talk, based on recordings made in one type of Speaking lesson, which suggests that - even in class - interaction with the assistant gave the students the opportunity for different sorts of talk than with the teacher. We also discuss the students' perceptions of the assistant's role, and summarise the ways in which we have now extended that role in the pre-sessional programme.

1. Origins

There were two points of origin for the study we describe in this paper. The first was the suggestion from past pre-sessional students that we should increase their opportunities to talk to native speakers (NSs), by bringing in someone other than a teacher, someone 'normal' or 'ordinary', as they put it. The second was a visit that Tony Lynch made to the University of British Columbia. One of the EAP classes he observed there featured a 'cultural assistant'- a Canadian undergraduate who participated as a member of the class and acted as a second NS informant. The idea of doing what we subsequently did, that is, taking on a course assistant with both a classroom and a non-classroom role, was inspired by the example at UBC.

2. Theoretical background

One can relate the potential benefits of interaction with an NS to three of the main hypotheses about language learning: Comprehensible Input (associated with Krashen 1981), Negotiated Interaction (associated with Hatch 1978 and Long 1983, among others) and Comprehensible Output (Swain 1985, 1995). It is reasonable to argue that what a learner gains from additional conversation practice with an NS is the chance to:

hear and get used to more informal spoken English than in class (input)

ask questions to clarify language and ideas in what a speaker is saying and to practise skills of turn-taking (interaction)

express themselves in English, to stretch their interlanguage when they are not understood and to get feedback (output)

A central issue in language teaching, particularly in classrooms encouraging student-to-student interaction, is whether such interaction assists language development as effectively as student-to-teacher talk. Pica and colleagues have investigated both advanced EFL classes (Garcia Mayo and Pica, 2000) and low-intermediate EFL classes (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos and Linnell 1996), and

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conclude that student-student interaction features similar but more limited opportunities for input, interaction and output than would be available with an NS.

In addition, Swain has said that the three functions she has identified for output (noticing, hypothesis testing, and metalinguistic reflection) are more likely to arise in some types of task than others (Swain 1995). For example, when learners are asked to discuss their versions of an input text, as they do in dictogloss, they may be encouraged to talk about details of language form in a relatively natural way (Swain and Lapkin, 2001). Lynch (2001) has drawn similar conclusions from a study of learners of English engaged in transcribing and correcting their own speech.

There is, however, general agreement that, although student-student interaction helps, it is impoverished (compared with NS talk), except at the most advanced level:

> The finding that learners are a somewhat limited source of modified input warrants some caution toward teachers' confidence in (learner-learner group work). It speaks well, however, for classrooms that are heterogeneous in their distribution of learner and NS interlocutors.
>
> (Pica, Lincoln-Porter, Paninos and Linnell 1996: 80)

The authors do not say what they mean by 'heterogeneous' classrooms, but our study looked at one possible version, a class involving two NSs – teacher and course assistant.

3. The setting for the study

IALS runs a pre-sessional EAP programme from July to September, preparing mainly postgraduate students for entry into British universities in October. The full programme lasts 13 weeks and comprises four courses – three of three weeks (60 classroom hours) and one of four weeks (75 hours). In recent years most of the students taking our EAP pre-sessional programme have been East Asians, who tend to be less proficient in listening to and speaking English than in reading and writing it, so a main aim of the EAP programme is to bring their competence in the spoken medium into line with their written-medium skills. One of the speaking skill components in the first six weeks of the Programme is a series of 'scenarios' (Lynch and Anderson 1992), in which students need to persuade someone to accept their point of view. Scenarios proceed in five stages:

1. Half-class groups (A, B) read role-cards and prepare their performance.
2. One pair (A+B) play the scenario 'in public', with others watching.
3. The two players return to their group for debriefing.
4. Second A+B pair play a public scenario.
5. Debriefing by the class, led by the teacher.

4. The course assistant

The course assistant (CA) featured in the study worked with us for four summers, during the period when she was studying for a modern languages degree. In the first summer (1996) she contributed to speaking skills work in three ways: she participated in scenario lessons; she talked to the students during a weekly review; and she was available as a conversation partner during the mid-morning break.

5. The classroom study

5.1 Focus

We were interested in the possible effects on classroom interaction of bringing in a non-teacher, and in particular the assumption underlying the original students' suggestion, that a 'normal' NS offers a different type of communicative experience than a teacher does. In assessing the CA's contribution, we have concentrated on the *Scenario* classes, since that allows a direct comparison of interaction with teacher and non-teacher on the same topic and task.

5.2 Expectations

We expected there would be a greater focus on language in student-teacher talk than in student-CA talk, because the students might regard the CA as having less authority in that area. We also assumed that there would be more negotiation of meaning – especially more requests for clarification – in interaction with the CA, since (1) she had less experience of NS/NNS interaction than the teachers and would understand the students less well; and (2) the students would be less used to her Scottish accent than that of the teachers, who were both from southern England.

5.3 Participants

There were 18 students in two classes: a lower-level class (approximately 4.5-5.5 IELTS) taught by 'Gail', and a higher-level class (5.5+ IELTS) taught by 'Dennis'. Gail and Dennis were similar in age (in their fifties), classroom experience and academic background (PhDs in applied linguistics), as well as in origin and accent.

5.4 Data

Parallel recordings were made over a period of six weeks, during Stage 1 of nine Scenario lessons, when half-class groups were working with either the teacher or the CA. The recordings were transcribed and analysed into *topical episodes*, (sequences of speaking turns on the same topic). We adopted the categories of *literal* and *non-literal* frame, derived from Goffman (1974) and featured in Hancock's study of role-play interaction (Hancock 1997). Speakers are regarded as speaking in literal frame when they are being themselves, and in a non-literal frame when they are playing a role in a classroom activity.

We set up a provisional set of categories on the basis of the initial analysis of transcripts reported in Lynch (1998). We coded the Stage 1 transcripts separately and then met to compare our categorization, reaching agreement in the cases where we had assigned an episode to a different category; cases of disagreement were relatively rare. The final set of categories is shown below, with two examples of each category (taken from the transcript of a *Bank* scenario):

Non-literal frame

General procedure

1. *Is this one going to be filmed?*
2. *One out the group has to go up to practise*

Task management

1. *Could you join this group?*
2. *Do you think you're now ready?*

Input text: Content

1. *This student has cashpoint card?*
2. *Ok the spelling + the spelling is different*

Input text: Language

1. *"Distrust" is opposite of "trust"?*
2. (pointing to the word "withdrawal" in the text) *This one?*

Output: strategy

1. *So maybe we could try to think of a reason*
2. *Maybe they will ask + + + to have identification*

Output: language

1. *Yes this now situation is bad + I mean first how can I say?*
   + + + 'I have some problem'
2. *Yeah but we don't normally say 'What is your identity'*

Literal frame

On-task

1. *Yeah + some days ago + I went to my bank*
2. *How about your country... this situation ?*

Off-task

1. *What means "cabaret"?*
2. *Oh I'm sleepy* (laughs)

5.5 Findings

Analysis of the episodes suggests that in Stage 1 the students' interaction with the CA was more like that with Gail than with Dennis in overall quantitative terms. *Mean* refers to the mean number of episodes per scenario, and *Share* is the proportion of episodes initiated by students or NS.

Table 1. Initiation of topical episodes

	Total	Mean	Share
Ss	115	12.8	56.2%
CA	90	10.0	43.8%
Ss	48	9.6	59.3%
Gail	33	6.6	40.7%
Ss	58	14.5	73.5%
Dennis	21	5.25	26.5%
	365		

The topical episodes involving the CA tended to be shorter (205 episodes in the nine CA recordings, compared with 160 in the nine Teacher recordings). The CA was also more like Gail in terms of her share in initiating episodes - approximately four out of every ten episodes; Dennis initiated only one in four episodes.

We had expected language-focused talk to be more frequent in interaction with the teachers than the CA, but that turned out not to be the case.

Table 2. Initiation of language-focused episodes

	Input (text)	Output	Total	NS Share
Ss	11	8	19	
CA	8	3	11	36.6%
Ss	3	11	14	
Gail	0	5	5	26.3%
Ss	3	3	6	
Dennis	3	0	3	33.3%

'Input' episodes were those in which the discussion focused on the role card texts, while 'Output' episodes were about the language to be used by the players in Stage 2. The lower number of language-focused episodes with Dennis could reflect the higher proficiency level of his class, although the difference between the two classes was relatively small. The overall totals for this type of talk with the CA and the teachers are very similar: 30 language-focused episodes with the CA and 28 with the two teachers.

However, when we consider who *initiated* those episodes, we find that the CA initiated relatively more talk about language (36.6%) than Dennis (33.3%) and, particularly, Gail (26.3%). The CA's initiations were primarily comprehension checks about information on the role card. On the other hand, the language-oriented episodes initiated by students were predominantly clarification requests or suggestions.

A substantial amount of the time in Stage 1 – 137 out of 365 episodes – was devoted to discussing how to approach the task. Here the CA was more proactive than the two teachers in initiating strategic episodes, as indicated in Table 3.

Table 3. Initiation of strategy-focused episodes

	Total	Share
Ss	47	63.6%
CA	27	36.4%
Ss	23	82.1%
Gail	5	17.8%
Ss	28	80.0%
Dennis	7	20.0%
	137	

There we can see that the CA took the lead more often in encouraging the students to discuss what strategy to adopt at Stage 2. In Table 1 we saw that interaction with the CA featured more and shorter episodes. It may be that she saw it as her responsibility to ensure that her groups completed the Stage 1 planning satisfactorily, and so she tended to 'chivvy' them through their discussion. It could also be that she was less used to allowing the thinking time that L2 learners may need in this sort of activity. The teachers seemed to be more prepared than she was to wait for the students to come up with suggestions for Stage 2.

The area in which the students' interaction with the CA differed most from interaction with the teachers was in terms of talk in a literal frame, i.e. about their real lives.

Table 4. Initiation of episodes in literal frame

	On-task	Off-task	Total
Ss	17	10	
CA	4	2	33
Ss	4	0	
Gail	4	0	8
Ss	8	0	
Dennis	0	0	8

There were twice as many literal frame episodes with the CA as with the teachers combined. In addition, although we found no instances of either teacher initiating Off-task episodes, the CA did so twice. Strikingly, there was not a single case of a student initiating an Off-task episode with a teacher, whereas there were 10 in interaction with the CA.

Why did the students talk more about themselves with the CA? One reason could be that they felt more able to do so with her, as a younger person and as a less authoritative figure, in the classroom at least. There may also have been a practical reason: they had more time to do so because, as we have seen, she tended to push them on to complete Stage 1.

5.6 Questionnaire responses

At the end of the data collection period we distributed a post-course questionnaire (reproduced in the Appendix) in which, among other things, we asked the students to compare their interactions with the CA and with the teacher. In brief, our analysis shows that

- Most students found their teacher easier to understand than the CA.
- Most found it easier, or as easy, to speak to the CA.
- Most said that the differences they noticed between the teacher and the CA were in accent and speed of speaking. Two thought the CA spoke less accurately. On the other hand, a further two described her accent as 'ordinary' and 'natural'.

- In terms of language improvement, the students said that interaction with the CA benefited them as much as (or more than) that with the teacher in four areas: vocabulary, pronunciation, listening and fluency.

It was only in relation to grammar that they felt interaction with teachers was more helpful. This could in part reflect occasional comments from the CA herself about grammar, such as in this extract below. A Japanese student (Y) had noticed that the instructions on his role card (below) included what he thought was a grammatical error.

"A foreign student comes into your branch, saying that they opened an account some days ago. They have not received their cashpoint card...".

Y but second "they"

CA that's talking about students

Y but

CA I know + it says + uh + that's singular

Y hm

CA sorry I have to read it + "they have not received" + + it is + referring to this student that's going to visit us

N "they" + I think "they" + speak about more than one

CA no they're just talking about one student + don't ask me to explain some grammar to you *(laughs)* + I don't think I'm qualified

Ss *(laugh)*

We also asked the students to comment on the value of the CA outside Speaking classes. Their replies suggested that they talked to her about three main topic areas during the morning break: firstly, practical issues to do with life as a student in Edinburgh (e.g. finding accommodation); secondly, aspects of Scottish culture and particularly the differences between Scottish and English culture; and thirdly, current news stories. The main approving comment on their conversations with the CA was that they appreciated the chance to practise talking to someone who spoke 'informally' and 'naturally'.

In answer to our final question on the introduction of the CA, the responses were predominantly positive, with comments such as:

- *It helps us to get used to native speakers*
- *It practices listening to normal speed English*
- *You don't know exactly what kind of sentence will come next*
- *We gain confidence with someone not so formal as a teacher*

It is interesting that in terms of the three current hypotheses about language learning, the first three of those comments relate to the Input and Interaction Hypotheses, and only the last could be interpreted as relating to the Output Hypothesis – in other words, that the students saw the value of talking to the CA as a chance to listen to a NS or to engage in conversation, rather than to monitor their own speech.

However, there was one dissenting comment, from a Spanish student who had taken the EAP Programme although she did not intend to go on to university. She wrote '*Que es realmente el papel de la Course Assistant?*', ('*What is the role of the CA, really?*') It could be that it was partly because she was doing a pre-sessional course for different reasons that she saw less point than other students in getting used to the speech of a (pedagogically) unqualified assistant, particularly one with a Scottish accent that she might well not encounter again. It may also be significant that this student was the linguistically weakest member of the lower-level class – indeed, she was the only respondent who opted to answer the questionnaire in her L1. It would be understandable if greater difficulty with the CA's speech reduced the value she saw in interacting with her.

6. Classroom roles of the CA since 1996

In the light of the success of the innovation, we have extended the CA's role in the Scenario component in four ways. First, we have asked her to play the scenario with the class teacher; their performance is videotaped and replayed as a sample (not a model) of NS interaction, for students to get insights into British speech (e.g. the common softening of a refusal with *'actually'*).

Second, we have asked the CA to transcribe some videorecordings of NS performance. Transcripts have great potential for helping L2 learners to focus on form, but of course they take time to produce. The CA can help by doing a preliminary rough transcript and wordprocessing it, for the teacher to check and re-format into a student handout. This allows the teacher to focus on form in the post-task phase, without needing to spend out-of-class time on the transcribing.

Thirdly, we have now made changes to Stage 2 of the Scenario procedure. Instead of the original 'public' performance by two students, we now get all the students to play the scenario privately, in parallel pairs. When there is an odd number of students, the CA works as a partner with one student; when numbers are even, she helps to monitor the students' talk, to deal with requests for language help, and to listen in and comment on the pairs' recordings once they have finished.

Lastly, the most recent development has been to ask the CA to help with students' editing of their scenario performances (Lynch 2001). The student pairs transcribe (parts of) their Stage 2 performances; they then edit and correct their original transcript, and pass it to the teachers for reformulation. This has created a new role for the CA at Stages 7 and 8, as consultant to students as they discuss corrections and improvements to their transcript. This offers one way of highlighting the Output aspect of speaking practice – performance as a platform for correcting and refining their L2 speech – of which the students in the 1996 study seemed unaware.

7. Conclusion

We set out to investigate the possible impact on classroom interaction in the IALS context of taking up the previous students' suggestion of bringing in a 'normal' native speaker to complement our EAP teaching staff. Having now looked at the classroom data, we conclude that the CA did make an appreciable difference to both the distribution and the nature of NS-student interaction in class; the students' questionnaire responses show that she also increased the amount of speaking practice outside class. The findings from both sources point to the value of the additional native speaker to the participants in the EAP programme.

From the students' point of view, it may be that the most important difference the CA made was that, even within the constraints of classroom interaction, they were able to find – or take – more opportunities to talk about themselves when working with her than with the teachers, helping to achieve what van Lier (1996: 147) has called the 'contingency' of real-world conversation. Our study suggests that the introduction of the CA has been beneficial for the EAP programme – something that has been appreciated by both learners and teachers.

It goes without saying that a single-case study such as this may be untypical – in fact to our knowledge no other British university EAP course makes use of a CA with the combination of roles that we have described here. The CA featured in the study was followed in summer 2000 by another, also an undergraduate student of languages, and informal observation of her interactions with the EAP students over two summers suggests that she was no less successful than her predecessor in creating the opportunities for additional and different practice that the introduction of a CA was intended to foster. Whether the introduction of a CA would work as well in other cultural and pedagogic contexts – or indeed in a different type of course in the same institution – is a matter for conjecture, and perhaps of observation and analysis on the lines we have sketched here.

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Appendix

Research questionnaire:

Comparing conversation with a teacher and a non-teacher

Scenarios

Please think about your experience of talking to [CA's name] and [T's name] when your group was planning your role in the scenario. Then circle the answers that match your opinion:

1 a I found it easier to understand [CA]

1 b I found it easier to understand [T]

1 c I found no difference in understanding them

If you have circled **1a** or **1b**, please say why it was easier to understand her:

2 a I found it easier to speak English to [T]

2 b I found it easier to speak English to [CA]

2 c It was equally easy (or difficult) to speak English either of them

Again, if you circled **2a** or **2b**, say why you found it easier to speak to her:

3 The main difference(s) in the way [CA] and [T] spoke was/were that...

4 Did you improve the following in the Scenario? If so, with which speaker? Put a cross to show your opinion:

	more with CA	*more with T*	*equally from both*	*neither*

vocabulary

grammar

pronunciation

listening

general fluency

Outside the Speaking class

5 Did you speak to [CA] in the Study Room? YES NO

6 Did you speak to her in coffee breaks? YES NO

7 If you have answered YES... what sort of things did you talk about?

8 Did you find it more useful to talk to her (a) in class or (b) outside? Why?

General

9 Having a non-teacher (as well as a teacher) to talk to on the EAP Course is (a) useful (b) not useful because...